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BOOK REVIEW

Yoga in Britain: Stretching Spirituality and Educating Yogis. Suzanne Newcombe. 2019. Sheffield, Bristol: Equinox. 309 pages.

Yoga in Britain is the long-awaited monograph by Suzanne Newcombe, an American academic based in the United Kingdom (Open University and Inform, King's College London).[1] Known as a prolific scholar in the fields of yoga studies and contemporary religion, Newcombe currently studies the relations between yoga and *āyurveda* as part of the AyurYog research project (ayuryog.org). *Yoga in Britain*, the fruit of a long-lasting inquiry, reflects her interest in the transformation of religiosity and spirituality in the twentieth century, seen through the lens of yoga practice as it was introduced to and developed in Great Britain.

Newcombe's book is a continuation of the foundational studies on modern yoga by Elizabeth De Michelis[2] and Mark Singleton.[3] While these two authors focused mainly on the colonial period and the British influence on yoga in India, Newcombe discusses the transformation of yoga in Britain, after India achieved independence. Although the narrative sweeps across the entire twentieth century, her most in-depth analysis covers the period between 1945 and 1980. Despite the book title's reference to 'Britain,' the work focuses mostly on what was going on in England, or more precisely in large English cities such as London, Birmingham, and Manchester. The discussion of the role of national television, popular music, and printed media in the popularisation of yoga offers a window into how an understanding and practice of yoga might have been shaped in different parts of the country.

Each of the book's chapters focuses on a different medium through which yoga was presented to the British public. The first chapter (*The Literary Elite: Booksellers and Publishers*), summarising the reception of yoga in the first half of the twentieth century,

[1] Inform is an organisation providing research-based information on new and minority religions.

[2] De Michelis, E. 2004. *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*. London: Continuum.

[3] Singleton, M. 2010. *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

introduces the publishing houses and bookshops that offered yoga- and esotericism-related literature. The three following chapters (*The Self-taught Yogis, Adult Education and the Wheel of Yoga; Charismatic Gurus in Adult Education; Middle-Class Women Join Evening Classes*) discuss the phenomenon of state-supported evening adult education in post-war Britain and explain its role in the legitimisation, popularisation, and standardisation of yoga practice, mainly among middle-class, middle-aged practitioners. Chapter Five (*Yoga in Popular Music and the 'Counter-culture'*) examines the relationship between the public appeal of pop-music and the introduction of yoga, meditation, and other Indian tropes into youth culture. *Yoga on the Telly* (Chapter Six) explains the role television played in encouraging individuals to attempt the practice of yoga. *Yoga as Therapy* (Chapter Seven) highlights how the long-standing claims of yoga's therapeutic efficacy were interpreted and presented to British practitioners. The final chapter (*Diversity of Practice and Practitioners*) discusses the different soteriological interpretations of yoga practice emerging amidst late twentieth-century tensions between secularisation and the individual search for spirituality.

Being primarily a sociologist of religions, Newcombe takes up the subject matter from a historico-sociological perspective. While rich in historical information (concerning, *inter alia*, the formation of the British Wheel of Yoga, the rise to fame of B.K.S. Iyengar, and the founding of the British branch of ISKCON), her book goes beyond just reporting names and events in chronological order. Each chapter, and each particular yoga-popularising medium described, are a pretext to depict particular social phenomena characteristic of post-war Britain. The author illustrates how yoga became inscribed into existing British social practices and crucial social issues, thus emerging as a local, context-specific phenomenon.

The overarching themes of the book are education and its different means, as well as the privatisation of religion and spirituality. Yoga and its practice serve as a lens through which these phenomena may be observed with acuity. The introduction of yoga classes into adult education programmes is depicted as part of a long-lasting tradition of autodidactic study that operated – supported by a socialist stance – since the late nineteenth century, and ended with Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal reforms. Interestingly, even the application of yoga as an element of wellness culture, now often associated with liberal and consumerist attitudes, is positioned within a socialist discourse. Newcombe explains how in post-war Britain well-being was seen as a social responsibility, a way of not over-burdening others with one's health issues through taking better care of oneself. While this may not tally with the motivation of self-seeking contemporary practitioners set on personal growth, it does seem to have been the key motivation offered to British housewives attending yoga classes in the 1960s.

One of the important topics that Newcombe examines is that of "institutionalisation of charisma" in modern yoga milieus, exemplified by the lineage of B.K.S. Iyengar (Chapter Three). While the British Wheel of Yoga insisted on treating yoga as comprehensively as possible, seeking to offer an unbiased presentation through shunning identification with any single lineage, other emerging yoga organisations were founded on the charismatic personalities of particular gurus. B.K.S. Iyengar managed to use his charisma to transform what was his subjective experience into an orthoprax system transmitted throughout Britain (and eventually across the world) via course syllabi and teacher certificates. In other words, he managed to standardise and professionalise a role that was originally an expression of vocation rather than a trained profession. Until today, the most successful Iyengar Yoga teachers remain those able to use their charisma to legitimise this system. Realising this may make it easier to relativise and deconstruct the position of the teacher in contemporary yoga milieus, the emotional dynamics between the teacher and their students, and the role of charisma in reinforcing or transforming those practices within these groups that may be ill-grounded, disadvantageous, or even abusive.

Apart from the aforementioned points, a great value of Newcombe's work lies in its showing which transformations of yoga in Britain are distinctly British, i.e. influenced by the peculiarities of British society. While some events described in the book – such as the rise to prominence of B.K.S. Iyengar – are relevant to the global history of modern yoga, others – like the role of adult education in promoting yoga, the scepticism and reluctance of the British Wheel of Yoga to support particular lineages or gurus, or the specific understanding of tending to one's well-being as a social responsibility – seem quite local.

Because yoga was exported out of India largely, though nowhere near exclusively, by English speakers, and because it is easy, especially from an anglophone point of view, to see this language as the contemporary *lingua franca* of modern yoga, it may be tempting to conclude that Anglo-American interpretations were key to the shaping of international receptions of yoga. However, just as Newcombe's book shows us to what extent yoga in Britain was adapted to suit local circumstances, future studies of other localised adaptations may reveal significant differences and variations in other reception histories.

Matylda Ciołkosz
Institute for the Study of Religions, Jagiellonian University, Krakow

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